



How to Provide Good Reading For Children

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HOW TO PROVIDE GOOD READING FOR CHILDREN.

Some one has said : " Tell me what you read, and I will tell you what you are " ; and hardly a greater truth could be enunciated, for there is no greater agency in the world in building up or destroying character than the books read ; it is, to a great extent, the pabulum on which the mind is fed, and it is the material from which either strength or weakness is drawn ; and if mature minds can be affected by what is read, how much more so must it be in the impressionable time of childhood, and how lasting the consequences ! The children are either stimulated to admire and imitate high and noble characters, or they are weakened and dwarfed by the bad example of the people set before them, and who have been absorbing their attention. It behooves all, then, who have the welfare of the young at heart, to watch with care everything

that can affect the youthful imagination or injure the tender mind.

As a natural starting point, we will begin with the birth of the young soul sent fresh from the realms of creation, and confided to the care of virtuous parentage. God has entrusted the little creature entirely to the father and mother, as if saying, "Here is one of the most precious of all gifts committed to your care—a priceless human soul, to be trained for eternity." The little creature is very helpless; it rests upon its mother's bosom. Soothing tones address it, warm love protects it, and every one is fully alive to the importance of guarding and caring for it physically. But do they as often realize the importance of guarding the opening intelligence of the immortal soul, which begins as early as, and keeps pace with, the development of the body? The whole being is like a piece of plastic wax, or the snowy pages of an unwritten book, and the mother or nurse in charge is leaving indelible impressions which are to last forever, for good or evil, for weal or woe. How the little body is guarded from all danger of contagion! How alarmed and distressed would they be if fever or skin disease should fasten itself upon the tender

flesh, while, all unconsciously to them, the first insidious poison of a deadly disease may have already made its first attack upon the soul. The dearly loved child, the beautiful little creature, is, after all, but the casket of a priceless jewel. Surely the jewel must be of more consequence than the casket ! Indeed, how often is the finest and loveliest physique marred by the unruliness of the spirit within ! Hence by far the most important duty which the parent or guardian has to perform is to guard the mental growth and spiritual welfare of the child.

The first question asked is how to provide good reading for the child. We should say, in order to pave the way for it at as early an age as possible, begin with a softly-breathed lullaby, for this is the age when impressions are possible, before there is any responsive intelligence. Let it be, then, spiritual as well as tender, so that the ear may gradually grow accustomed to the blending of sweet names with equally sweet strains, as :

“ Our Father in heaven, we hallow Thy name,
May Thy kingdom holy on earth be the same,”
etc., sung to a suitable air. Unconscious impressions are thus made which are afterwards to influence the tastes and inclina-

tions of the child. Then, as intelligence increases, the little one is told that it must be good, because a loving Father, an all-seeing Presence, is ever about it. It confides and has implicit faith in these early instructors, and believes and trusts what it is told, and we know that the very foundation of the future character of a child can only be well and happily laid on the principles of *truth*.

Never to tell a child anything but what is true is an exceedingly safe course. I will, I fear, be challenging the prejudices of many when I condemn entirely all fairy tales and fictitious literature until the age of at least eight or ten years, when a child is old enough to understand what fiction means. A sensitive child can never forget the rude awakening it receives when it learns for the first time that the enchanting creatures for whom its heart has throbbed have no real existence. The child, never before having doubted anything that parents have told it, when awakened to the fact that these stories, so sweetly read and told, have no foundation in truth, is in a maze of perplexity and doubt, wondering that the teachers of truth have themselves told them things which were not true. It is a trying time to a child,

and may tend to shake its belief in things of more lasting importance, and prove a shock difficult to recover from.

The story is told of a bright little boy who was once teased at Sunday-school for believing in Santa Claus. Being an only child, he was no doubt kept more petted and under the influence of childish fancies than he otherwise would have been. He protested that he believed in Santa Claus and knew it was true about him—"because his father and mother had told him, and *they* would not tell him anything that was not true." Going home, he demanded of his mother about Santa Claus, and she had to tell him it was a fiction ; the child was greatly grieved, and said : " Oh, mother, you have told me about *God*, too ; how am I to believe that that is true ? "

I would advocate that the first reading for the young should always be taken from the Bible, that marvellous book, the grandeur of whose imagery and the purity of whose diction is unrivalled in all the world. In it can be found incidents of the most stirring and interesting character, well suited to please and satisfy the most exacting and imaginative of children, and which are at the same time true and undeniable, and more interesting than any that

could be woven from the fanciful brain of man. We can read or tell them of the little child from heaven, born in a stable, and laid in a manger, with a star placed in the heavens to keep sentinel over His birthplace, while, not far from it, the gates of heaven opened, and the shepherds beheld the angels, and heard them singing and praising God. Or we can read to them of Joseph and his coat of many colors ; of the shepherd king, David, the sweet singer, who, with his pebble and sling, went forth and slew the giant who had defied the armies of Israel—surely no giant of fairyland could equal the thrilling narrative connected with this one ; of Daniel, and of Samuel, that sweet child, who, as soon as he was weaned, was presented to the Lord, and became of such an exalted character that, when in his old age, challenging Israel to bear witness whether he had ever injured any one or not, they had to declare his blameless life. There is also the story of Moses, placed in his little ark of bulrushes, watched by his sister and found by a princess. (What fairy tale contains more to excite the imagination than this ?) My firm conviction is, the early years should be *entirely* filled with Bible story, so that the good obtained

may be the most lasting. Charles Dudley Warner says " he believes that the present state of ignorance of the Bible on the part of college students is to be corrected only by attention to the fundamental cause of this ignorance—the neglect of the use of the Bible in the home in childhood " ; and he adds, " In the family is where this education must begin, and it will then be as it used to be, an easy and *unconscious* education." We are told that in old age, when incidents of the moment make little or no impression on the mind, the aged person lives again in whatever constituted the *earliest* impressions of his or her life. Thus it is a safe thing to begin and end with the teachings of the sacred book.

But when the little one has come to the age when you must tell it of the things which pertain to material life, why not substitute for the " Babes in the Wood " the story of the " Princes in the Tower," and, instead of fairy princesses, let them learn of our own " Victoria the Good," who, when a little princess, was trained day by day to fit her to rule the greatest empire the world has ever seen ; and so on, making history easy for them ? Then there is fairyland in nature. You can let them read of all the wonders of the field and

forest, of which there are innumerable graphic and entertaining writers, of river and lake, of bird and bee, ever keeping closely to the truth, and I do not think the little ones will ask for anything more interesting or exciting if they should teach them of the starry heavens above, with its myriads of worlds and suns, and there surely will be enough in all this to feed the most ardent imagination. We have begun with the theory of keeping closely to the truth, and I believe it will bear fruit. An eminent divine has said, "Give me the first seven years of a child's life, and I will not feel so anxious for the future."

When they have arrived at the stage when it is better for them to vary their reading, and they must have fiction, let them read such conscientious writers as "A.L.O.E.," Elinor Lewis, Hesba Stretton, Miss Mulock, Sir Walter Scott, Mrs. Stowe, and many others. The Rev. Dyson Hague tells us in *Parish and Home* of some of the dangers of reading fiction, even of the best. In the first place, he tells us, it is a waste of precious time to give as much as is frequently done to a custom, which, when indulged in, creates a slavishness of anxiety for a still greater waste of valuable time, to the exclusion of serious

engagements and duties. In concluding the article, however, he says that he does not condemn the reading of fiction altogether, but begs that wise selections be made from such writers as Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Stanley J. Weyman, Lew Wallace, and others. I would include such stories as "Black Beauty" and "Beautiful Joe," stories which interest the youthful mind, while teaching them to know more of the nature of dumb animals, and to be kinder to them than they otherwise would. Annie E. Chase, in her "Stories from Animal Land," gives a pathetic little incident, which may not be inappropriate, and of which many thousands must occur daily, and which could be averted by making the children more familiar with their lives and habits. Then there is that sweet songstress, Frances Ridley Havergal, who must not be forgotten, and whose "Little Pillows" are read by myriads of children to-day; I would also advise selections from the poets Wordsworth, Longfellow, Whittier, Tennyson, etc. There are also the church papers and parish magazines, of which we cannot speak too highly. I again repeat that the power for good or evil which good or bad literature exerts over the youthful mind cannot be

over-estimated. A writer in the *Methodist Protestant* said : “ A pastor found many of his parishioners who were too poor to take their church paper, but who took several secular papers and tales of fiction, that cost four or five times as much. Cause : they had little relish for religious reading. Effect : their relish for religious reading lessened every year. Mystery : they wondered why their spirituality was so dull, and that their children loathed everything of a religious character. Result : those children who married and left home ceased church attendance altogether.”

A deeply pious clergyman told me that one of the greatest men of the age, and a seeker after truth, had told him that he would give all he was possessed of if he could disabuse his mind of the evils instilled into it by the early reading of skeptical works, but there is no room for skepticism, and no taste to read of it, if the mind, in its opening years, has been fed upon the Word of God. Shaftesbury, the great philanthropic earl of that name, was converted by his pious nurse at the age of seven years, and dying at the age of eighty-four years, after a life of usefulness, would fain have lived longer, there was still so

much to be done in the Master's vineyard. One of our own bright jewels in the philanthropic field, Miss Bertha Wright, of Ottawa, who has achieved so much in the service of God, told me that she was deeply impressed at the age of eight years. Lincoln, the great emancipator of millions of slaves, lost his mother at the age of seven years, and yet he tells us, after overcoming, with herculean strength and courage, the many difficulties that beset his path, that he owed everything to his mother. To mothers and to those who have the care of the young, I would beg, begin with the prayer at the cradle, thus seizing the first and earliest opportunity for impressing good ; with the sacred hymn for a lullaby, and the Book of Books for primary instruction ; and the character thus built on truth will be strong and self-reliant. The tastes formed aright will guard them for the future. And I urge upon the parents, at the same time, to be as vigilant in guarding what their children shall read as though the child was to pass through a plague-stricken country, and could only escape by the most watchful care of mother or guardian. Sin is a hydra-headed monster, ever on the alert to ensnare the innocent and capture the un-

wary and unsuspicious, and thoughtful womanhood can have no higher aim or object in life than to do all in their power to protect and guide the helpless and to form the tastes and inclinations of the young aright, so as to keep their minds pure and spotless, while being intelligent and well-informed, and to fit them to take their places in the world, when the time shall arrive for it, as young men and women, strong, intelligent, pure, and self-reliant.

A. S.

